

# Ballad of the Green Horseman

A Poem

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## Ballad of the Green Horseman

### I

Riding I am riding  
Riding in the desert  
The blue and cobalt desert  
Between the sea and mountains

Between the sea of ebony  
And the mountains of gold and copper  
Between the sea of ice  
And the mountains of green fire

I am riding and my horse  
Is moving full of powers  
The powers of thought and movement  
And the powers of will and fear

The powers of all torments  
The hundred powers of desire  
My horse is many horses  
That move and flow beneath me

I'm one yet many riders  
I'm one and yet a hundred  
A hundred and a thousand  
A thousand and yet one

The landscape flows behind me  
And it opens up in front  
It opens up in front of me  
And it closes up behind

## II

The sand hills flush to red  
Day is opening its jaws  
The sun is a huge spider  
And dew is glistening on shrubs

The dew on glistening shrubs  
Is the spider web of the sun  
Sand valleys and sand hills  
Are fired pink and red

The sun is a white furnace  
Opened between the mountains  
I feel the opened furnace  
From beyond its icy hills

Now the desert sand is amber  
Like the smooth pelt of a tiger  
And the tiger of the sand  
Is striped with crooked shadows

I never look behind me  
Not even when I sleep  
I slept and slept I lay in sleep  
For many nights for many nights  
But now it is broad day

The shadows on the sand  
Are black and point one way  
They say, go back go back  
Pointing back where I came from

The steady horse beneath me  
I am going toward the sun  
I am waiting for the desert  
To unfold itself and it does

### III

Now how I love you green O green  
Green branches in the wind  
The desert flowed away at last  
The amber crust of sand

My love is green she's green as grass  
Green with her upraised arms  
Her huge and very bright green eyes  
Searching for my hidden love  
I came into the river country

The sun was low behind the trees  
That its blood spattered through  
On black earth it was dying  
In profuse and silent agony

I watched the crucifixion  
And holy burning of the sun  
And I was spattered with the blood  
Of ten suns and of twenty suns

For forty nights I waited there  
To go on further through  
The deep green wood the sun had made  
My eyes were two white suns



My amber eyes like a tiger's eyes  
My hay green and hay yellow eyes  
Were like my lovers eyes  
I watched and waited for her call

I waited at the river's edge  
The river flowed and flowed  
It called for me to enter  
And it called for me to come

#### IV

I came into the river's country  
The river at night I heard its sounds  
The river at night must think and feel  
In strange sounds from its open mouth

The trees had eyes their bark  
Had faces as I passed beneath  
Their branches were their arms  
They lifted high black streaming hair

My horses felt the breathing  
Of the woods around so close  
And near the river's mist the air  
Was like a woman's breath

Steps and steps of horses  
Horse of shadows shadow horses  
Flowed amid the waving trees  
That hung by moonlight in the stream

The sun gone down the sky was huge  
Deep black the stars were falling sparks  
The circle of the shining moon  
Burned in the water gold

My shadow horses and I swam  
We swam into the moon's circle  
We broke it with a shimmering wedge  
It glittered back when we had passed

The river's water raked and pulled  
It sucked us in it drew  
Us in so steadily  
The current the dark undertow

I felt that time had stopped  
We didn't seem to move  
The night was damp and very cold  
My horse's breath was frost

The bank came near and there  
I met the Indian the morning sun  
Burned in the tree's inverted crotch  
He stood there tall in streaming light

V

He stood up in the oak tree  
In the crotch of a tall oak  
Then he was at my side  
He raised his hand his eyes were green

His teeth were yellow like dried corn  
He smiled and smiled for me to smile  
I looked around my horse was gone  
Gone with the shadows of the night

We walked all day and then at night  
We camped he made a fire  
I hadn't realized how cold it was  
My hands and face were numb

The fire was hot my skin got warm  
Beyond the green and yellow flames  
I saw his face observing mine  
It floated in the fire's streaming  
Like the moon in the water's streams

It flickered and floated in the fire  
It floated down to the fire's sticks  
And then blew out a cloud of sparks  
It floated around and floated up

It floated up to the fire's crown  
Then suddenly it was the sun  
The night had gone the day had come  
He and the fire both were gone

## VI

I walked on through the tall tall trees  
Through domes of leaves and leafy crowns  
The sun placed fingers on my skin  
Like a buyer fingering some cloth

And then there was a field of ash  
Long houses once the Iroquois  
Were burned and everything was burned  
The houses of the Iroquois

Their land was burned just ash  
Was left and nothing left but ash  
The smell of burnt skin burning wood  
The charred white ashes smoking still

The glowing embers here  
And there a woman sat  
Upon the ground weeping with her long black hair  
Her long and black and blackest hair

Her hair fell down before her breast  
And at her breast her child  
Stared up with open eyes  
As black as buttons and as dead

Its head fell back as limp  
As any rag doll's head  
My shadow in the sun  
Passed silently over both of them

Bodies and parts of bodies  
There were bodies thrown everywhere  
Legs torn off and arms ripped loose  
Torsos without arms or legs  
Heads with no faces charred faces

Charred faces with no eyes or nose  
Intestines blue and bluish green  
Like rotted sausage casings  
Spilled from the stomach of a woman  
Who lay with both her arms tossed wide

Her naked child still clung  
To one half-severed leg  
It squirmed and fussed and cried aloud  
Its mother could not hear

A corpse was rotting in the road  
It had ballooned to twice its size  
Its legs were greenish grey  
And its face was black as tar

Then near a ditch I saw a man  
Who slowly pulled himself along  
Crawling forward on his palms  
Both of his legs were torn off

Blood came in a pulsing gargle  
From his nose and from his mouth  
He seemed to be screaming screaming screaming  
But all was choked and drowned with blood

One leg was ripped off at the thigh  
A little above the knee  
The other was ripped loose from the hip  
With part of the buttock too

He made a trail of thick blood  
Blood from both legs stumps  
And blood came from his anus too  
He seemed to be shitting gouts of blood

## VII

I came out on the other side  
The wood birds chattered overhead  
With sounds like a million creaking gates  
Or like the whistlings of the mad

A dog came from behind a tree  
It foamed a moment then it leaped  
As though a wave had crested foamed  
And then washed over me

The back-wash was my blood  
My blood red blood green blood  
Blood spread and spurted  
From my arm its jaws were steel jaws

But then my knife was deep inside  
Its stomach it still bore down  
I buried my knife again again  
Deeper and harder every time

The dog fell like a burlap sack  
Empty and limp its face became  
A woman's face its shagged fir  
Her thick black hair her bloody hair



And then her soft inviting face  
Became a wooden skull  
A thousand bees were swarming there  
As though inside a tree

Bees are the kisses of the sun  
They swarmed around me and the sun  
Was laughing all the shrill birdsong  
Joined with the laughter of the sun

Loud laughter in the sun's green trees  
A thousand thousand bees stung me  
Bees are the kisses of the sun  
I ran as I had never run

Then it was night they fell away  
A sickness came through the forest's trees  
Whispering for me whispering  
Like a thousand women whispering

Horseman horseman horseman here  
They said so loud so quietly  
Horseman horseman horseman hear  
Everything we've come to say

## VIII

I vomited the night was red  
The night was black the grass  
Was cold against my face  
My body shivered with cold sweat

I dreamed I dreamed I heard  
The movements of the grass  
The grasses kissed and tongued my ear  
Saying their tiny secrets there

I heard the insects in their world  
The ants were stirring in the dark  
Their catacombs where spirits lie  
For nights and nights and rise again

The trees were all around the night  
Was opening its many wounds  
Archaic song the deep black song  
And chanting in the moonlit leaves

Then three old women Indians  
First one then two then three  
Came close and bent to look at me  
Then silently they went away

They went away into the night  
I saw them stopping here and there  
Stopping and bending moving on  
Picking up gleanings from the field

Then deeper in the night I saw  
A large campfire and four old men  
Were sitting around it playing cards  
Talking drinking out of gourds

Their shirts were black and braided gold  
Hung round their wrinkled necks  
That shook like turkey wattles  
When they laughed their eyes were gold

They played cards laughing quietly  
And looking closely I could see  
Their cards had human limbs on them  
Their gourds were full of human blood

Their gourds were full of blood and pus  
They laughed and wiped it from their mouths  
Their arms and wrists were dried cornstalks  
Their hands were roots still caked with dirt

Their hair was yellow hair  
And the light brown of the cornstalk's hair  
It hung down in their faces faces  
Brown and cracking like cracked dirt

## IX

And then I woke the morning dew  
Shined in the grass and spiders' webs  
In every tree turned it and light  
To thin ice crystals in the leaves

I walked on in the brightening green  
The orange sun and the yellow sun  
Sparked through the leaves its beams  
Were full of radiantly spinning dust

And then I saw I spied him  
There at the clearing's edge  
He wore a black hood over his head  
The rest of him was dressed in red

Then in an eye blink he was near  
Our knives were drawn  
They scraped and flashed  
Like bright wings in the morning air

My arm was dead the cloth  
Was stiff and still blood-soaked  
It was my left arm only though  
My right arm was still good

I stabbed him in the heart  
And in his heart I dug my blade  
He fell without a word or sound  
A fear came over me just then  
I listened and I looked around

He lay there dead upon the ground  
And blood as red as red lacquer  
Was on the bright green stalks of grass  
In tiny beads and clotted smears

I don't know why I had to see  
I don't know why and so I drew  
The black hood from his head  
And saw the man's face I had killed

He smiled at me a funny smile  
Was on his lips his lips  
Were like a woman's lips  
He smiled up with a woman's face

Then neither a man nor woman smiled  
Neither a woman nor a man  
Its pelvis jerked and jerked  
As though pulled up and up by strings

But only that one part of it  
Was pulled by strings was pulled  
By strings was something dead  
Was like a puppet pulled by strings

And then it was a child's face  
That smiled there so angelically  
Smiled in the deep repose  
Of death as sweet as any sleep

And then its skin turned leather-like  
Dried and tough and stiff and brown  
As though the skin were shrinking up  
It grinned and showed its teeth  
Like parched corn purple and tobacco brown

## X

I went on further the night came  
The trees were black shapes in the night  
The trees had gathered skeins of stars  
To wrap their heads in sparkling nets

Then suddenly there were no trees  
The ground had changed  
It opened gradually and  
I was in up to my knees

Then I was in up to my waist  
The mud was black as blackest oil  
And slippery to the touch  
And shined like oil in blue moonlight

Then night was crowded full with hands  
And arms that touched me everywhere  
Fingers that held me choking me  
The night had hands that held me fast

At first I tried to pull myself  
Out of the oil and black mud  
The more I pulled the more I sank  
The oil was like the night was infinite

The sea of oil all around me  
And like a bird stuck in crude oil  
I couldn't move my arms or legs  
My voice was choked with oily mud

I floated in the midnight sea  
I floated in the sea that smelled  
Like kerosene like gasoline  
I was a shimmer in the night's deep well

It was the well of night of time  
Everything was frozen still  
I tried to shout my thoughts echoed  
My voice was silent my silent voice



## XI

And then at once the larger trees  
Large trees enormous oak trees bent  
In the night the wind was moving  
In their branches as they hung down to me

Somehow I floated toward the trees  
Up from the depths the midnight pool  
In which the trees' reflections hung  
I drifted up and grasped their boughs

I clung to the oak tree's boughs  
The day grew slowly in its limbs  
The watery reflected tree  
Grew slowly real in the sun

And when the sun was high enough  
I saw myself I had no legs  
My legs were gone were root-like things  
The pool had rotted them away

Had rotted both my legs away  
And I was left with two  
Dead limbs that stank  
As horribly as the pool had stunk

Pale worms in clots of mud  
Wriggling things that's what I had  
O sickly rooting potato eyes  
Or a wobbly fork like a mandrake root

I tried to climb I tried to climb  
Away from what I saw  
I tried to climb away from it  
Hideous remainder of my life

Then I was in the green grass again  
Elbow on elbow hand over hand  
I clambered forward pulling grass  
In thick handfuls I barely moved

## XII

The mantis tree the mantis tree  
Each oak tree was the mantis tree  
The mantis stirred and looked at me  
With bright green eyes hay yellow eyes

Each oak tree was a mantis too  
And every mantis clutched a man  
Who hung the way that hanged men do  
Their chin tucked low and neck askew

Each mantis held a single man  
Their poses were like playing cards  
Or stained glass windows in a church  
If there's a green light shining through

The rain the rain then came the rain  
hot rain that burned and sizzled  
Through the leaves it simmered  
Burning whisper of corrosive rains

I lay there on the ground I lay  
The brilliant rain the golden rain  
Corrosive whispers of the rain  
Were seeping and seeping into me

I weakened on the ground  
And I could feel my hands  
Growing thin and growing frail  
Like metal rusting to a crust

My limbs were blood-caked  
Bandages I touched my mouth  
My mouth was numb  
And stiffened as though packed in gauze

The rain will stop the night will come  
But in the dawn I too will be  
Together with my mantis lover  
Dead inside the mantis tree

Then I will be alone with her  
Green O green I love you green  
Green branches in the wind  
The desert flowed away at last

Then I will be alone with her  
The frozen mountains and the fires  
Of the desert sun have gone  
And I will be with her alone

Riding I was riding through  
The desert through the blue night  
Of the sands between  
The frozen mountains and the sea

Between the sea of ebony  
And the mountains of bright gold  
Between the burning copper sea  
And the mountains of green fire

Riding I was riding  
And my horse was full of powers  
Powers of thought and movement  
And powers of will and fear

The powers of all torments  
And all powers of desire  
Between the sea of copper  
And the mountains of green fire

## AFTERWORD

### Encounters With the Author in Taipei

We first made the author's acquaintance at a well-known restaurant in Taipei, the Wysteria Tea House, famous as having been a meeting place for dissident intellectuals in the years of political struggle in Taiwan .

During the recent effort to publish his rather extensive work, we had occasion to discuss aspects of his past and current writing.

*Your poetry is quite varied in style and in form. Where do you locate yourself in the overall debate concerning poetic form?*

I consider myself an eclectic. The main thing for me is to grasp, mentally, a certain object -- that is, an experience, a scene, an event -- to see it and feel it. Any language that seems to convey the reality of that is good, any which remains merely language, merely words, is for me of no interest, in some cases it is actively negative, in the sense of being obstructive.

*A cliché?*

Yes or not even a cliché but in a way worse than that. Much of our language obscures the nature of reality. Words in themselves are, in a sense, the enemy of writing. I tell students that all the time. Words most often merely convey the usual accepted social understanding. Writing is for the purpose of grasping reality itself, which is always something other than the social understanding.

*Do you consider yourself a political writer?*

All writing is political in the sense of attempting to correct these false social understandings. At times its purpose is to merely reveal with a new freshness, a perceptual freshness, as it were. But even this itself has a certain basic political significance, in the sense that awakened human beings will act and think differently than those who are at rest in the normal tranquilized non-perception that we usually are caught up in.

*Does living outside the United States help or hinder your writing?*

I think it helps, in general. It is in some ways a very undeveloped culture, yet in other ways it is overbearing. (The US, that is.) There is, for example, a great deal of rather stifling political correctness, as it's called, and to get away from that is itself a positive thing. For a while I had no idea how I would ever get all this material published, especially if you're not there trying to do all the "networking" that is needed, and which I was absolutely

terrible at anyway -- worse than terrible, I really had no clue, I still don't, I suppose. And then it came about that you could just do it all by yourself, by means of the internet.

*How much material is it? It's quite a lot, it would seem.*

Yes, I guess it's about 40 volumes or so. Over 2,000 pages, if you want to measure it like that. I don't know how much it would weigh.

*There seem to be many styles represented. Was that something you consciously strove for?*

Yes. I always wanted to be able to represent a wide variety of experiences. My first models for the artist were people such as Picasso, Goethe, Bach -- artists who could work in a very wide range of forms and even use widely different styles. Of course, I can't compare myself to people like that, but it was still a goal, to try many types of things.

*What sorts of things are you working on currently?*

Well as you know I am trying to get all this existing work published, going through it, touching it up here and there, proofreading, and so forth. After that, I think I might return to some translating work -- Holderlin especially, and some Chinese poets, but don't ask me which ones.



## About the Author

Steven Frattali is an expatriate American writer living in Taipei. He is the author to date of over 40 volumes of poetry, totaling over 2,000 pages of work. He is also the author of several critical works, among them *Person, Place and World: A Late Modern Reading of Robert Frost* and *Hypodermic Light: The Poetry of Philip Lamantia and the Question of Surrealism*.

## About the Banyan Press of Taipei

The Banyan Press of Taipei was founded in 2008 by Samuel Palmer and Steven Frattali. It plans to publish the work of expatriate Anglophone writers of the Pacific Rim who are working outside the norms of mainstream publishing. The Press does not at this time invite submissions, but it hopes to do so in the future.